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Kentucky Folklife Program Interview Transcription

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)

Field ID and name: #0021; Joel Gillespie interview

Interviewee: Joel Gillespie

Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman

Date: 4/23/2014

Location: Mammoth Cave National Park, KY

Others Present: N/A

Equipment used: EOS 70D DSLR Camera

Microphone: Rode, VideoMic Pro Compact Shotgun Microphone

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Context:

Technical Considerations: Audio file was created from the compiled video files for the purpose of transcription

Transcription prepared by: Jennie Boyd

Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations “ ” indicates dialogue within conversation.

Use of italics indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

[time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds]

[00:00:00]

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Okay, it's April 23, 2014. This is Brent Björkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. And I'm here at Mammoth Cave, doing, continuing in my interviews with rangers about the occupational folk culture of rangers. And with me today, I have a, a special guest and, special guest, if you could say your name and tell me what your current position is here.

JOEL GILLESPIE: My name's Joel Gillespie. I'm a park ranger that works in the interpretation division, so I'm a park guide.

BB: Okay. So Joel, let me ask you how you first came into this idea about wanting to be a park ranger. Was it something from a long-ago, childhood? What's your story with that?

JG: It's real simple. When I first got, when I first got the idea of being a park ranger was, I was in fourth grade. And my teacher was teaching us about conservation, recycling and energy. And I remember, I can still see the picture in front of me of this aluminum recycling facility. And I immediately started offering suggestions on how to make that work more efficiently. And decided that conservation's important. And so I had other things that I decided to do in life, but I always had that back, creeping around that I wanted to be a park ranger.

BB: So this idea about preservation, conservation, was something that happened from an early age and then—so before, then, being led into where you are today, was it, was it a route after high school and some, some seasonal work or how did that all begin for you?

JG: For me, becoming a park ranger starts off, I guess with my dad's an engineer and I'm, I've got kind of an engineering mind so I, he really wanted me to pursue that. He worked for the corporation near us in Decatur, Alabama, and he'd have me tour the facility. He'd talk to me about college and I went to two years of schooling to be an engineer, took physics, sitting in physics class, trying to do math with calculus, and was doing okay, but I didn't like it. And so I think I changed, let's see, I changed that to an audit, asked a friend of mine,

“What are you studying?” And he said, “I’m studying to be a wildlife biologist.” And I said, “Well, that’s what I want to do.” So I became a, I started studying that and I had some other things that I wanted to do in life too. I wanted to serve the country in the military, wanted to be a zookeeper, and I haven’t flown a plane yet, but that’s the last thing yet to do. But I, anyways, I dropped out of the engineering field, went into the biology field and I guess the next little chapter of that story is I met a girl at campus that was working with birds of prey. She was a rehabilitator. And so I, she asked me to hang out with her and, you know, learn how to doctor these birds back to health. And in doing that, I learned that I like not necessarily being center of attention, but I don’t mind standing in front of an audience if they’re looking at something else. And so standing in front of crowds with a bird on the shoulder is, you know, it’s the easy way to, to teach people the importance of wildlife around us without me having to be the center of attention. So that, let’s see, I, that ended up leading me into the, the zoo world. I got, I got to work as a zookeeper at two different facilities. And then—

BB: In this area?

JG: And, one was in Oregon and the other was in Texas. And then my grandmother got sick, and they needed somebody to live with her. So I moved home to stay with Granny. And when she got better and didn’t need round-the-clock care, I went looking for another job. And I applied at a number of national parks, but Mammoth Cave picked me up.

BB: What year was that, did you start?

JG: Two thousand four.

BB: And you had military service?

JG: Um-hm.

BB: From that, that period? Okay. Two thousand and four, okay. Did you, were you hired on as a permanent position?

JG: I wasn't then. I was hired as a seasonal. And I quickly realized that Mammoth Cave is a great distraction from your life goals. I had no plan to stay here, but, you know, I expected I'd have to go looking for something. It would take me a while to find something, but as soon as I got here, I realized this was where I wanted to be.

BB: Wow. Interpretation is how it started, right?

JG: Yes.

BB: Yes. What was that first, stepping into this position, the first, what was the first week like, or the first, first period of time. How did your training go? How did—

JG: Well I remember training fairly well. I was with a lot of my, a lot of my peers in the training class. It was a two-week training course. And a lot of them were college students. We had a few that were, that had retired from other jobs, that I was being trained with. We had one lady that was hired to, as a permanent that was in our training class. [0:05:00] But I'd already been doing this, not to say that I'm any good at it, but I'd already been an interpreter at zoos, so I'd, I came here with three years of pract-, of full time experience. And I'd been a naturalist at a fish and wildlife refuge for a year, so I'd, I was pretty comfortable talking to people about stuff, you know, in-, the interpretation aspect of it. So the, I remember, I was just thinking the other day inside the cave on the Discovery Tour that we were doing, my first time in the Discovery Tour and I was there as a trainee. I'm there in civvies, but I'm asked to stand next to this girl and she would get a big crowd around her. And people obviously knew that I was with her since I was standing with her the whole time. And she later commented to the supervisors that when she got busy, Joel's over here with his own crowd, you know, sharing stuff. And it was, it was very comfortable

to me. Mammoth Cave's very comfortable to me. So that's what I remember about my first season.

BB: Right. And was it, was it doing above ground, below gr-, was it—

JG: It was all below ground. Our first season, I don't think we do any above ground stuff, usually. Well, except maybe some kids' programs.

BB: Yeah. So the interpretation, the birds of prey, that thing, you know, so, the cave was—

JG: The cave's—

BB: Your prop, or your, your, your other thing.

JG: Right. The cave's what they're looking at. The re-, the artifacts are what they're looking at. We might have some props that we create and bring into the cave to use, but they've got something to look at, they just need a voice to help them understand it. And I like doing that.

BB: Um-hm. Um-hm. And coworkers are, you know, was there—it sounds like you were a natural—but are there things about this particular place that you were assisted with with coworkers? Do you have, how did you get along, how do you get along with them, you know, what's that, what's that work environment like, when you, working alongside—I know there's guides that are, there's the lead and there's a trailer and that sort of thing as well, right?

JG: That's right, and I think the, the tradition is that the leader's the leader, the trailer's the trailer, and don't let the two cross or what have you. But I like working with, many of my coworkers that are my, I guess, age, or my generation seem very comfortable at working together in a team aspect. So, you know, it's not uncommon for, if I'm leading a tour, if I

don't know something, for me to ask my partner, "Are you aware of this? Do you have, you know, any input that you could share?" Or what have you. And it seems to be a really good team mentality with that which I think is important that, that a person leading a trip or the vi-, the public meet a park ranger that is knowledgeable and, and well informed, well studied. But not necessarily has to be the all-knowing, the omniscient park ranger and to be able to acknowledge that I've got a limit, but I also know my resources is, I think, an important trait. So I like, I like the coworkers I work with because we can work off of each other, we can help each other.

BB: So when you're, you're sharing historical information or, or things about the caves themselves, is there a basic kind of script or is there, are you, do you go out and find things out yourself? Do you go pour over books and find things? Or, you know, how is that transmitted to you by higher ups about, was there something like, "Joel, people usually develop their style this way." Not that they didn't think you had style.

JG: Right. Well, our supervisor, the first year I started working here was very determined that we would develop for ourself. And one thing I've always appreciated about working at Mammoth Cave compared to other jobs that I've had to do the same kind of thing, provide either interpretation or presentations, is here we were encouraged to do research. We have a library. And the library is right off the wing of our breakroom. So to be able to step into the library while you're on break to pick up something and study to, I've always said that one thing I appreciate the most about this job is the scheduled research time. You come in, you've got three cave tours that you've got to do, but there's thirty minutes of research time scheduled into your day for you to pull out a book or a magazine, get on the internet and find out something new. And I, I can't tell you how rewarding that is. Makes you feel like you're doing a better job, but it makes you also feel like you're not stagnant with your knowledge. A lot of the information I've picked up is, was, in those early years, it would have been [0:10:00] just picking it up from my coworkers, listening to those more experienced, you know, picking up what they had learned. And, and they do the same thing, we teach one another. We also conduct for each other trips into the cave or even on the

surface, off the clock. We call them our after-hours trips. And might take a new employee or even somebody who's been here longer than me to a place in the cave or the park that they've not been before and teach them about things. So I find that very rewarding beyond just, you know, my regular assigned jobs, to get to know more about what I'm talking about so that when I'm doing the interpretation, it's, it's, it's not just book knowledge, it's practical knowledge too. But yeah, I, I've got some few hobbies that I like to pick up in the cave or, or things I like to look into. The Mammoth Cave's got a lot of names written on it. And just comparing that to what you would encounter say if you went to the fish and wildlife refuge that I worked at, I remember you walk into the visitors' center and there's a book. You're supposed to write your name down, where you're from, the date of your visit and a comment. You know, it's the registry. And you can go in and get that book out, you can flip down through the years and see, oh, where are these people coming from? When did they visit? How many was in their party? But if you look at the walls of Mammoth Cave, we've got inscriptions that go back thousands of years. People are coming. They tell us who they are. They write down when they came. They might write where they're from. They might write what their profession is. Mammoth Cave itself is its own registry. So I like studying the names and finding out who these people are. And I like to say we're not here if people hadn't come before us. So if these people hadn't of come and by their visit recognized that Mammoth Cave is significant, you and I wouldn't be here today.

BB: Exactly. So that, that was really thoughtful. And you know, working with people too, I was just curious, with coworkers, do you challenge one another too, with being able to get some information across, or do you have a game that you might play, you try to, you try to work something into your script or, or do you push each other like, you know, wow, how did you learn that? I got to find out more about that.

JG: I think all of those come into play. Well, maybe not so much the game. But, but on the others, when you hear somebody that shares some, something fresh and new that in ten years of working here you haven't heard, it, it puts you in your place. You know, let's you know that you, you don't know it all and there's a lot more to know, which means that

you've got to go find it yourself. And I like what one of my supervisors said the first, well, subsequent years as I was listening to her train some new trainees. The later class. She mentioned that to do this job very good, you've got to think you're the best. I don't know what she means by that, but, (laughs) but I do believe that, or at least for me, if I hear somebody talking about stuff that I've not heard before, it means that I've got to step up my game. I've got to get better at what I'm talking about. I've got to study harder. I've got to get back in the library. So there's that. And then there's also, if you, well somebody might try a new technique of trying to get a point across.

BB: Um-hm.

JG: And you pick that up from them. If it worked for them, you might use it yourself. And some of us say that flattery is the best form of, of compliment. No, let me rephrase that. I can't think of what they say. Mimicking? No, no, no. When somebody steals your idea.

BB: See now you have me—I know what you're talking about. Um.... Um...

[INTERRUPTION—RECORDING STOPS]

BB: Plagiarism. Go on.

JG: All right. Lost my train of thought. Plagiarism is the best form of—

BB: Flattery.

JG: Flattery. So, so when you hear somebody using, telling a story that you've not heard before, you hear somebody that's got a fresh date that you haven't heard before, you hear somebody that's been to a portion of either the cave or the park that you've not been, and you know, their wonderful discovery, it makes you just want to absorb it too. I mean, as much as we're the park rangers who present it to the public, we're still trying to get it

ourself. And there's so much more to, to learn, so that we can do a better job of sharing. So yes, we do, we do encourage each other in that, in those ways.

BB: Do you, you push each other and also to kind of explore, but also sometimes, I've heard maybe physically exploring. Do you, maybe you don't, but do people go into the cave [0:15:00] when they're not working, and to explore or to—

JG: Yeah.

BB: To explore.

JG: Well we do have an organization called the Research Cave—Cave Research Foundation that I think they do all of our exploring for us. And there are park rangers who participate, not in the park ranger capacity, but they do that as a, as a side hobby as well. I do not.

BB: Um-hm. Have you explored other things? I know you have a lot of, you have a lot of knowledge about a lot of topics and a lot of passions. You know, you started out even with birds of prey earlier in your, in your career getting into interpreting. But how about at the park? Are you encouraged to find your own interests and share those?

JG: I like to think so. For me, one of, like I said, one of my main interests is, is the names. And during the wintertime, our visitation really slows down. It drops to sometimes it's just you and one other, you and one other person in the cave, the two of you. And, you know, say you're on a two hour cave tour, you can do that, that cave tour in twenty minutes with one person. But then you find all these little neat names along the way that you can, you can give the a richer experience by pointing out some of these things that otherwise, you just walk by on a, on a busy summer's day. Some of the names that I've identified in the cave was, see, I recently wrote a paper on a Doctor Zeigler who was the man who first introduced sports enhancing drugs to our American athletes. There is a, the name of a man whose son became a fighter pilot in World War II and, and as a fighter pilot in World War II,

he became the character for Steve McQueen's role in "The Great Escape." His dad's name's written in there, in the, in the cave. So it's, you know, just neat little trivial things like that, but they, they really speak to who Mammoth Cave has reached out and touched, as those people have turned around and reached back and touched us, in, you know, in the things that they've done for us.

BB: How do you go forward and research that? You have a, you have a chunk of a name. Is there a register that, if there's a particular year connected to that, and then, or do you just—

JG: There's got to be an extra piece of information. So if you've got the name, you've got a date that, that will get you started maybe. But it's a lot like genealogy. It's essentially genealogy. So you take a name, and if they write a hometown, that's helpful. But the one that's started it off for me probably is the best example. This guy, Earl McKinster, when he wrote his name, he wrote his birthday. And his birthday is January 20, 1908. And when Earl wrote that, he wrote it in 1936. I found it in December 2007. If I could find this man, anything out about this man, within a month, it would, he would be a hundred years old. And so I quickly got to working on it, and I was able to call his son on his dad's one hundredth birthday, and we talked about his dad. And that was, to me that was pretty cool.

BB: That is very cool. Wow. That's a great story.

JG: Well, the story continues. That his son said, I said, "What, can you send me a picture of your dad? Any chance you could tell us what this guy looked like?" And he said, "No, I can't, because my dad died," I think in '72, and Earl's house burnt down in '76. The only picture that Earl has of anything regarding his dad is a photograph I took of his dad's name on the wall of Mammoth Cave. So that's, that's what got it started for me. And those are the kinds of stories that I like.

BB: That's very emotional.

JG: Yeah. Yeah.

BB: It's, it's pretty, pretty great. Wow.

JG: It's more than just a cave, it's, you know, it's touched people's lives and I like to, to be part of that.

BB: And you've also touched people's lives by your on-top environmental pieces that you know. You know a lot about the, the flora and the fauna as well, and that, that's been an interest of yours.

JG: Um-hm.

BB: I don't know how long, but I guess probably all the way along.

JG: When I was a little boy, my aunts would take me out hiking in the woods. And eventually I got to where I was taking them out hiking in, in the woods. So yeah, I've, I've enjoyed being out in the, on the surface side of things too and getting out, learning about the different plants, their uses if they have alternative, you know if, if they have uses. Yeah, I do. I like those things.

BB: You were taking them because you, they gave you a cursory look at things, then you—

JG: Right.

BB: [] Um-hm. Do you guide tours talking about those kinds of things? And I, and I also know that you have a connection to, and I don't know if it's at the park, but [0:20:00] to beekeeping and understanding that whole aspect of nature.

JG: I do. I do try to incorporate anything that the public seems interested in when I'm guiding a tour, so, and we do some surface hikes, where, you know, getting out and talking about flowers or plants and adding in little extra things about what they may be used for. So we do have activities that allow us to do that.

BB: How were, how is this area, what is particular to plant, or what are the particular plants and things that you talk about to this particular region and this particular park kind of?

JG: Well, let's see. Right now, we're celebrating our, we just celebrated Wildflower Weekend, so there's a lot of wildflowers in bloom right now. And we do a hike each day that somebody leads out to a place called Cedar Sink where we have a chance to demonstrate some of those wildflowers. As far as anything in particular, it's just, it's so diverse. How do you pick one or two? You asked also about using my, my beekeeping knowledge. You know, when I first started working here, I think that was something that my supervisor at the time was very interested in, and when I became a permanent employee, she encouraged me to do a program about it. But back to that first week, we were allowed to, to tour curatorial, walk through the place where we've got a lot of old artifacts set aside and protected. And while walking through there, I noticed this hollow log, cleanly cut off at the bottom, cleanly cut off at the top. It was about two foot deep, or two foot long, and it was hollow. And that's a bee gum. You could see even at the, at the bottom the little notch where the farmer had cut a V notch in it so that the bees could crawl in and out. This would stand upright. It'd have a board on the top and a board on the bottom, and the bees would live inside. And so I knew that that was a bee gum. And it was just an example of, you know, that, the practices of the people who lived here before this became a national park. There were beekeepers. And so when I became a permanent employee, I had to come up with a program to offer at the evening, evening program time. And so I do, I do one on honeybees. It was very popular, a lot of people come and will ask questions. And it's one that when the program is over, it's, it's a forty-five minute program, I'm usually there for another thirty minutes asking, answering questions and talking to the kids. So it's one that really, people really seem to like.

BB: Wow. And you, you practice that in your, in your other life away from the park as well.

JG: That's right. We have honeybees at home. I like to say that I've got over six million pets at my house. We got a lot of honeybees.

BB: And you've seen changes too. We talked briefly about that, that, weather and lack of moisture and all sorts of things attrb-, are a tribute to how productive things are and—have you seen a general change too in the honeybees? I mean, I know there's been a lot of talk in the news about, about that and I think a greater awareness is being built in America about the, the importance of them as pollinators.

JG: Yeah. A lot of people are interested in honeybees. A lot has been talked about. Our recent state apiarist told me that we haven't had any abnormal losses in Kentucky. I watched a, a program by another beekeeping friend of mine and, that he conducted, and so I think a lot of bee losses that we endure in Kentucky are user error. (laughs) But we don't have the agricultural, while Kentucky is an agricultural state for sure, we don't have the type of agriculture they have in California or even Illinois for that, or Florida, where it requires large quantities of honeybees for short period of time. That means that these honeybees are being shipped through, and back and forth. So, maybe we've dodged the bullet, simply by not having a lot of migration of bees in the, in probably what's a very stressful way of handling them, loading them up on big trucks, hauling them around, dumping them off. So that seems to be a good thing for us here.

BB: Um-hm. Um-hm. What's your idea of—I was asking people about the concept of stewardship and just as it relates to your life working in the park. You know, how do you see yourself and, and what's your concept of stewardship?

JG: That's a hard question.

BB: I know. It, it is.

JG: It is. Well, it's a hard question because I'm wearing this uniform. It's an easy question if I wasn't. (laughs)

BB: I see. I understand.

JG: My, my form, my understanding of stewardship is much deeper than my profession. It goes to my faith. I am only here because I have to be a steward. I'm expected to be a steward. I work because I'm responsible to take care of my family. [0:25:00] If I didn't have to, if I didn't have an obligation to be a steward as a husband and father, where would be my motivation to go to work and do something that draws me from the family that I love to be with. So stewardship is probably the, the easiest way to boil down what I do and why I do things. But boiling it down is hard. (laughs) It's all, what else could I say to that?

BB: Yeah. No, that's, that's good.

JG: I think if, by being here though, I have the, the opportunity to maybe hopefully birth in other people who not, may not necessarily be motivated to stewardship or may not have a big responsibility or a sense of stewardship to, to find it, to see that it's inside themselves too and may, you know, work with that or walk with that.

BB: Do you run into people that maybe it's younger people, maybe it's seasonal people that you can see some kind of a spark in them that they may want to, you know, continue on this path so many of you have as permanents. And what advice do you, do you give them about if they come up to you, you know. Law enforcement staff don't have as much, don't have as many opportunities, but I think, I was thinking maybe an interpretive staff, you see seasonals, you see volunteers, you see other people. And if, do they come to you for advice and if, if they do what do you say, or if they would, what would you say?

JG: When I first started working as a park ranger, I actually sought out people that wanted to do this job, because I knew what it took to, for me to get here I didn't start working for the park service until I was in my thirties. Yet it was something I wanted to do my whole life. And I would try to encourage them. I'd try to, you know I would give them tips and, and all, but as I've seen it getting harder and harder to get a job with the park service, or, or that the jobs are fewer and fewer, I try to give them more prag-, practical look to it. And, and, and probably do a better job of being mature about the, the fact of it all. But I, I'll give them the same advice I was given. When I was volunteering at a fish and wildlife refuge, and my supervisor there knew that this was what I wanted to do, knew that this is something that I, that I could be cut out for, and I asked him how he got in. And he says, "I'm a veteran." And I happened to be one too. In fact, when he said that, I said, "I, I needed just another push to get going in that direction, and that's all I needed." So I took some time away from doing this type of work, leading hikes and interpreting and working at a visitors' center location, took some time away to, to serve the country, and that's what I, another dream that I had anyways, to do that, and so when somebody approaches me now, I point out that veteran status not only is helpful to you, but it's also helpful to those that hire you. The things that a veteran can provide by way of the training that an employee might have, but also right now, we're, our country's in a stressful situation where they need men and women who are willing to, to enlist. And so it's, there's never been an easier time to be a veteran in recent years than right now. So that, that opportunity's available. And those are the things I like to share.

BB: When are you going to start flying?

JG: (laughs) Me and my little boy, he, he's, he's studying aviation right now. And we're going to a museum pretty soon to, for a, for a field trip. But when will I start flying? I think when he gets old enough for us to work on it together. It's something that I think he would really like to do. We just bought a farm three years ago and we're remodeling an old farmhouse on our property, and we've got so many things going on, that I think I need to not add that

one right yet. But, but maybe when he gets older and it's something he and I can do together, we may, we're going, we're going to do that.

BB: Right. This working, do you have any parting thoughts about this working environment and what you might share? Just something you'd like to get across for, for the record about being a ranger?

JG: Yeah, if you've got a moment. There's, I was talking to my wife about this the other night. I said, "I don't know what I would have to share except for a few stories."

BB: I'd love to. I'd love to hear some stories.

JG: I'm claustrophobic. And that gives me an opportunity with visitors that, I've heard one person say that you can't be a good cave [0:30:00] guide unless you've experienced claustrophobia because it helps you relate to a particular type of audience that, that many people would be surprised would show up at a cave. And this story happened when I was, just a couple of years ago, I was walking this older man, I guess he was in his eighties, through the cave with another man who had to have been in his sixties. They were father and son. And as they're walking along, the older fellow had come up to walk with me because he needed to have some space between him and others. So he was walking with me. And we're talking about him being claustrophobic too. And I explained to him that I shared that. And he starts telling me a story. And he says that he became claustrophobic because every year his dad would drop him down into the well to clean out the well. Now, he wasn't the oldest son, and he wasn't the strongest son, and he wasn't the smallest son. So he asked his dad, af-, after this had gone on for years, "Why do you always pick me?" And he said, "Because I know that you'll do a good job." But he's claustrophobic now because of him having to do that job. Here's the point of the story is the son, the eighty, the sixty year old son turns to his father who's late in life and says, "I've never heard that before." And it just, to me, that's what being a park ranger provides. It provides the opportunity for people to relate to each other. It didn't matter who I was. He wasn't telling me this story. He's, he's

connecting with his son, who he's known for over sixty years, but he hasn't had, he didn't know that story. And so to me, that's one of the things I like about the job. But it's not always, it's not always fun jobs. I had a, an incident, I guess it was last year in the cave where it, it turned out entirely different. Me and a coworker of mine are in the cave, we had a man collapse. He didn't make it out... And... So last week, this little girl, in the cave, asked me, has anybody ever died in here? And I said, "Yes, in fact, they have." And I said that we've got, we've got evidence that prehistoric people, you know, back when the pyramids are being built, people came in the cave and not all of them made it out. We have stories as recent as last year, in this very room. It just so happened we were in the room where that event took place. And I said, "This guy came in. He's, he and I are walking in the back of the tour together. He's the picture of health. You would never have known anything was wrong with him. He's enjoying being with his family. The two of them, or the, the family had all met at Mammoth Cave. This was their get-together point. And he didn't make it out of the cave." And it just, it, to, to finish answering this child's question in, in, you know, in the middle of all of these people, it's like, there's no guarantee any of us today will make it out of this cave. So let's take every opportunity and, to enjoy those that we're around and sometimes it's those kinds of stories that have just as much meaning. Everyday I go into the, every time I come to Mammoth Cave, whether I'm in the cave or, or on the surface, I'm around people who want to be together. And they don't want those occasions to end. And sometimes Mammoth Cave provides them the opportunity to, to get together, whether it's the Army buddies who haven't seen each other in forty years and they decided to meet at Mammoth Cave, or the family who's just come back from a funeral and the kids need to clear their mind after Grandma's just passed. There's so much more to it than just a, a hole in the ground. It's a big culture to it, I guess. Those are the stories I got for you.

BB: Joel, can you talk to me a little bit more about your, you know, this draw you have to investigating the signatures and things, and how you use that when you're working?

JG: Sure, well we, on one of the tours with my theme for the trip, the Violet City Tour is how Mammoth Cave has offered hope to people. The saltpeter miners, it was the hope to, to

make a fortune. You know, they were going to make a lot of money, short amount of time, selling saltpeter. For the tourists, it was, you know, hope for adventure, hope to experience something that you normally is out of reach in life, [0:35:00] hope to, to learn more about a prehistoric culture, to encounter some of the relics. But there was a Dr. Croghan who owned Mammoth Cave for a while, and he used Mammoth Cave as a tuberculosis hospital and most of us have either personally or through friends, dealt with the question of, you know, this treatment is not working, let's try something new. And we hope for that. We hope that there's something that will work. And we hope to, to continue in this life so that we can, you know, walk our daughter down the aisle or see the son graduate university, but there's a place in Mammoth Cave along that route where we, we've encountered some of the names that, you know, that I've described, where people have smoked their names on the ceilings or scratched their names on the walls in the early 1800s. But they also would take stones and stack the stones up along the causeway, making these little monuments, and then they'd put plaques or inscribe their names on a stone and put those there to say I was here. Well, when telling that story at that location, I like to tell about my family. My family came from Bankhead National Forest. It's a national forest now. But there's a place where my great-great- and my great-great-great-grandfather are buried. We've got tombstones there. They used to be just sandstone rocks, but we got nice tombstones there. And the intention for a few, at a, at a point, when I was in college, the intention was to clearcut that. Just bulldoze everything out of the way, and, you know, cut the timber out of it. But you can go to a, a cemetery that's well dressed, you can go to a cemetery that's well mowed, and you can still see, even there, tombstones are fading. So almost everything that we might leave in life is temporal. We're temporal. And then our relics are temporal. But the stone monuments in Mammoth Cave, those inscriptions on the walls, we've got some inscriptions that may be thousands of years old. As long as Mammoth Cave stands, and those things are there, those people are eternal. And Mammoth Cave offered them the chance of immortality. So, I think that's just a, just another way of understanding them or looking at them.

[END OF INTERVIEW]